

# **ALCOHOLISM AND FIREFIGHTERS: AN INTERVENTION STRATEGY**

## **EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP**

By: Mark I. Piland  
Virginia Beach Fire Department  
Virginia Beach, Virginia

An applied research project submitted to the National Fire Academy as part of the  
Executive Fire Officer Program.

February 2006

## Abstract

The problem is that the Virginia Beach Fire Department did not have an intervention strategy or program design to educate firefighters of the perils of alcohol abuse. The purpose of this study was to determine what other Fire Departments are doing to educate their firefighters in the perils of alcohol abuse. This is a descriptive research project. The research questions were:

1. Has alcohol use/abuse caused any loss of employment for firefighters in the past two years?
2. What strategies and or programs are being used by Fire Departments to address alcohol abuse issues in their departments?
3. What strategies have proven effective?

The procedures involved surveying a sample of 65 EFO graduates/students, and leaders from the sponsoring fire agencies of the FEMA Urban Search and Rescue System. The respondents to the research questions were tabulated by an arithmetic mean and reported out as percentages.

The results were: 37% of the respondents reported a resignation of a firefighter over the past two years due to alcohol related problems. One hundred percent of the respondents reported having an Employee Assistance Program in their department and 33% listed the Employee Assistance Program as their most successful strategy in the prevention of alcohol related problems.

The recommendation, based on the research, was for the Virginia Beach Fire Department to evaluate their EAP initiatives for its effectiveness in dealing with alcohol

related problems. Future researchers should look at cost effectiveness of EAP and other educational related programs design to prevent alcohol abuse in their departments.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Table of Contents.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Background and Significance.....	5
Literature Review.....	7
Procedures.....	11
Results.....	12
Discussion.....	14
Recommendations.....	15
References.....	17
Appendix A (Survey).....	20
Appendix B (Survey Results).....	21

## Introduction

The problem is that the Virginia Beach Fire Department does not have an intervention strategy or program design to educate firefighters of the perils of alcohol abuse. The purpose of this study is to determine what other Fire Departments are doing to educate their firefighters in the perils of alcohol abuse. This is a descriptive research project. The research questions are:

1. Has alcohol use/abuse caused any loss of employment for firefighters in the past two years?
2. What strategies and or programs are being used by Fire Departments to address alcohol abuse issues in their departments?
3. What strategies have proven effective?

## Background and Significance

At the present time, a comprehensive alcohol prevention-training program does not exist in the Virginia Beach Fire Department. Over the past four years, the department has had several firefighters lose their jobs due to alcohol related issues. This trend is alarming given the personal tragedy and the impact it has on the department both in terms of its workforce and emotional well-being.

According to the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (Facts about Alcohol, 2002) forty-four percent of the adult U.S. Population (aged 18 and older) are current drinkers that have consumed at least 12 drinks in the preceding year. The department states that most people do drink safely; a minority consumes alcohol heavily and produce consequences that ripple down to their families, friends and community.

The following statistics are according to the Journal: Alcohol Research and Health: Highlights from the Tenth Special Report to Congress, Health Risks and Benefits of Alcohol Consumption (Volume 24, Number 1, 2000 ed).

- Approximately 14 million Americans-7.4 percent of the population meet the diagnostic criteria for alcohol abuse or alcoholism.
- More than one-half of American adults have a close family member who has or has had alcoholism.
- Approximately one in four children younger than 18 years old in the United States is exposed to alcohol dependence in the family.

A study of the Oklahoma City bombing compared alcohol rates of rescue workers (firefighters) to those of male victims who experienced the bombing. Although rates of alcoholism of rescue workers were lower than primary victims 13% as compared to 23% it was noted that alcohol disorders were endemic in Oklahoma firefighters before the disaster occurred indicating a need for an ongoing program to target the problem (North et al. 2002).

There is some research that suggest that alcoholism among firefighters, especially those in the Fire Department New York (FDNY) is attributable to “high social drinking” and can be resolved with education programs (Glassman, 2004).

This study is important to the VBFD for several reasons. First, finding if their are successful and comprehensive alcohol prevention programs development by other fire departments will give the department tangible data and aid in its decision making process.

Second, having the ability to prevent an alcohol related incident both on or off duty would protect firefighters and their families from the consequences of alcohol abuse,

and continue to aid the department in the development of the future workforce and leadership.

This Applied research Project (ARP) relates to the Principles of Workforce Development, in the *Executive Leadership Course*. The section on Training involves training within organizations tailored specifically to support initiatives designed for cultural change (NFA, 2000, p 6-7). This project will specially look at prevention strategies and training to address alcohol abuse that in some cases may be cultural based in fire organizations that directly effect workforce development and retention.

### Literature Review

It would be difficult to look at prevention strategies of alcohol abuse without looking at the cause. Questions surround the firefighting profession as to post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) effects of the job, and a culture that is forgiving and in some cases inviting by allow alcohol in the firehouse. As we will see, not all experts agree as to the prevalence of abuse within the profession.

Mayor Gavin Newsome of the City of San Francisco called drinking in the firehouse the fire department's "dirty little secret" after one of San Francisco Fire Department's (SFFD) Battalion Chiefs tested positive for alcohol use (Mainline, 2006).

In April 2002, The New York City Fire Department alerted firefighters that it was enforcing the departments zero tolerance policy on use of illegal drugs and will dismiss those who fail a drug test (Flynn, 2002). The department's policy on drug and alcohol abuse, last revised in 1996, recommends the dismissal of firefighters for any drug infraction, on or off duty (Flynn, 2002).

The International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) has called on thousands of its members by advocating a zero-tolerance alcohol policy (IAFC, 2003). The question begs as to why would not all its member organizations adopt this policy? Chief Billy Goldfeder of, With the Command, wants the fire service to get serious about the sister and brotherhood of the fire service and adopt the zero tolerance in their departments. Chief Goldfeder says that we as firefighters are not against social stuff...just against firefighters getting killed or killing (Goldfeder, 2003).

There is much in the literature of alcohol being present in predominately volunteer fire stations. The history dates back to a firehouse formed in Philadelphia by Benjamin Franklin in 1736. This 1736 firehouse became the model for stations in the early 1800's that were often transformed into working class fraternal clubs (Smith, 2003).

These clubs were known for their rowdy behavior and soaring alcohol consumption of the early nineteen century. Smith goes on to write that defending alcohol behavior in 2003 because of some outdated traditions in the 1800's should get the public some right to be concerned.

Retired Los Angeles Fire Captain Jerry Smith has also written about alcohol use especially in fire stations. One volunteer firefighter described the fire station as a fire station in a bar" (Smith, 2003). "What sober, clear thinking volunteer or career firefighter doesn't understand life and death emergencies often require split second decisions...a critical moment when First Responder awareness and ability to analyze cannot be compromised by alcohol" (Smith, 2003). Smith also stated that he had never heard a convincing argument for having alcohol available at the fire station and for good reason, there are none.



When looking at effective prevention strategies one must also consider the stress of firefighting. A 2002 Cornell study took a look at New York City Firefighters in terms of the effects of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in regards to post-traumatic stress, drinking, anxiety, and depression. Many of the firefighters who participated in the study stated that since the attacks they are experiencing higher levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and an increased risk for drinking problems (Myers, 2004).

Samuel B. Bacharach director of the Smithers Institute at Cornell reviewed the 2002 Cornell study and stated that everyone is obviously concerned with illegal drugs but the primary drug of choice today is alcohol (Myers, 2004). Bacharach is a proponent for alcohol educational programs for those moderately affected but believes those with severe problems may benefit from more aggressive alcohol treatment programs.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) is also available to combat alcohol abuse. The City of Santa Monica believes the program is beneficial in helping their firefighters cope with family and social problems, including alcoholism (Santa Monica 2001).

The New Hackensack Fire District has a rigid no drinking on duty clause that is strictly enforced. The department is also aware they do not live in a perfect world and is aware of the problems associated with alcohol abuse and realizes that help is needed in some cases. EAP is provided to Hackensack firefighters who feel they may need help with abuse or family issues and may self-referral if necessary (Smith, 2004).

The Fire Department in Fort Worth Texas also offers their firefighters entry into their EAP, which also offers drug and alcohol testing programs that aid in evaluating the needs of their firefighters (Fort Worth, 2005).

Dodie Gill is the Director of the Arlington County EAP, Mr. Gill knows of the dangers associated with the attacks on the Pentagon and the effects it has on our nation's firefighters. Mr. Gill states that an internal EAP can aid in the longevity of relationships and create an intimate knowledge of the firefighters work environment. Gill believed the program could identify patterns of risky behavior and intervene when appropriate (Mulligan, 2001).

The Boston Fire Department offers educational messages through videos and books to assist their firefighters. The video Alcohol: True Stories by Matt Damon, provides that educational piece. The department believes that its employees value their kids and their families more than anything, sometimes more than themselves. This type of behavior may prevent them from seeking help when their best interests are at risk according to Lt. William Ostiguy, Boston Fire Department EAP Coordinator (Words at Work, 2003).

Another product from Words that Work is a publication entitled Words Can Work: When Talking About Alcohol. This publication depicts alcohol statistics, stories, and prevention strategies and is used in both Boston and New York City Fire Departments peer to peer counseling and substance abuse prevention programs (Words that Work, 2005).

Drug interventions can be a more aggressive treatment for alcohol abuse problems. Drugs such as acamprosate and naltrexone have proven effective. Naltrexone is considered more promising than acamprosate since acamprosate makes individuals sick when they drink and naltrexone makes individuals lose the taste for alcohol (Ropp, 1998).

Brian, a 43-year-old firefighter credits nalrexone with saving his life. Brian had lost his job as a firefighter and then a swimming pool contractor and finally ended up in prison after a DWI convention (Ropp, 1998).

In summary, it appears that most of the literatures on the subject of preventative measures are Employee Assistance Programs. In most cases, the employer is bearing the cost of these programs and is committed to making them available to their employees. Drug intervention strategies have proven effective although not much information was available as to its effects with firefighters.

### Procedures

#### Feedback Form

A feedback form (Appendix A) was used to gather information on problems associated with alcohol abuse. The questions focused on employee attrition relating to alcohol abuse, what intervention/prevention strategies were in place, and which ones were effective in treating this problem. The form was evaluated by several Executive Fire Officer (EFO) Graduates for clarity and ease of use and focus of the problem.

#### Population

A sample was taken of past EFO graduates from the author's Executive Development, and Executive Leadership Classes. A sample was also taken from program Managers of twenty-eight teams of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) National Urban Search & Rescue Teams. These teams represent many fire departments across the country. The total population for the study was 65. The sample was considered comprehensive from the standpoint of the various fire departments represented by the sample.

### Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used for the study as data was calculated directly from the feedback forms. Quantitative survey results are reported as percentages or as a mean of the observed data. The most frequently used measurement of central tendency is the arithmetic mean or average (Pagano, 1993).

### Limitation and Assumptions

Many of the participants may have been hesitate to answer questions on such a delicate issue. Confidentiality statements were issued with the survey to guarantee the anonymity of the departments participating.

Many of the email address were out of date and returned from EFO graduates and students. Also, “survey fatigue” may have come into play given the enormous amount of requests made of busy individuals such as EFO graduates and US&R Leaders.

The study assumed given the position of the respondents many would be familiar with attrition rates within their departments due to alcoholism and therefore could answer honestly.

### Definition of Terms

EFO Student/Graduate-anyone enrolled or graduated from the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy.

Employee Assistance Program (EAP)-programs that are generally sponsored by departments staffed with mental health care professionals offering counseling and treatment for social and physical anomalies.

## Results

### Research Question # 1

A total of 50 (77% response rate) feedback forms were returned. 30 (60%) were EFO students and 20 (40%) were from the US&R Program. One hundred percent of the respondents said that their department had some type of policy on substance abuse. When looking at the problems caused by alcohol abuse as it relates to job loss, 37% of the respondents reported that they had lost (forced to resign) one or more firefighters in the past two years. Sixty (63) percent of the respondents said that they had not loss any firefighters to alcohol abuse in the past two years.

#### Research Question # 2

Seventy-five percent of the responders stated that they did have alcohol prevention strategies in place with 100% reporting having an Employee Assistance Program. Twenty-five percent of the respondents said they also had a background check program in place to screen for alcohol problems prior to employment.

Twenty-five percent of the respondents reported that did not have any alcohol prevention strategies in place in their department. Fifty-six percent of responders reported to have mandatory referral programs for those firefighters found to be under the influence of alcohol; 63% did not have such programs.

#### Research Question # 3

Asking what strategies proved most effective produced mixed responses. Thirty-three percent of the respondents stated that the Employee Assistance Program was the most effective strategy their department had. Thirty percent stated that they had no way of knowing success rates due to confidentiality agreements. Other single answers provided were disciplinary policies, department support, and occupational health testing.

## Discussion

The results indicate that 37% of the department's surveyed lost one or more firefighters in the past two years to alcohol abuse. The impact on staffing and workforce development can be staggering when reviewing these results. This trend appears to effect large departments as well as the Fire Department New York (FDNY) felt compelled to reiterate their zero-tolerance policy and warned firefighters they would be dismissed if found in violation (Flynn, 2002).

Other major cities have lost firefighters as well from alcohol abuse as described by Mayor Newsome when the San Francisco Fire Department dismissed a Battalion Officer (Mainline, 2006).

Second, it appears that the finding that Employee Assistance Programs are in 100% of the reporting departments matches a nationwide trend. EAP in New Hackensack Fire Department, FDY and Boston are in place to give help to firefighters and protect their jobs in light of their zero tolerance policies (New Hackensack, 2004).

Also, EAP's in Ft Worth and Santa Monica Fire Departments indicate that these programs are highly regarded as appropriate intervention measures.

The last question related as to what strategies have proven effective. The majority of the respondents (33%) clearly stated that the Employee Assistance Programs were successful in their departments in helping firefighters with alcohol abuse. Again, this is consistent with the Santa Monica (2006) and Ft Worth Fire Department Programs stating the same (San Monica, 2006).

Seventeen percent of the respondents did mention that training programs had proven effective strategies in the prevention of alcoholism. This is consistent with other

educational video programs used by the Boston Fire Department and published materials used by the substance prevention center for the FDNY (Words that Work 2003).

To summarize, there appears to be a concern with personnel issues as it relates to alcohol as well as effective strategies to prevent and treat this illness. The Virginia beach Fire Department now has available some preliminary data to consider in regards to alcohol use and prevention.

### Recommendations

Based on this study, the Virginia Beach Fire Department should consider implementing preventative strategies to keep firefighters from becoming victims to alcohol abuse. Thirty-seven percent of Fire Departments surveyed have had a resignation or firing due to an alcohol related event.

The department should continue to sponsor their current Employee Assistance Program given that 100% of respondents stated they had an employee assistance program in their department.

The department should have their Employee Assistance Program monitored for relevance to alcohol prevention strategies. Thirty-three percent of respondents stated that their Employee Assistance Program was the most effective strategy for preventing alcohol abuse in their department. The department should also evaluate alcohol prevention programs such as the ones used in Boston Fire and the FDNY and incorporate videos and other literature in a system wide educational prevention approach.

Other departments' interest in this study should look into more specifics as to what makes their Employee Assistance Programs successful. Also, a costs analysis

should be conducted as to the monies needed to run Employee Assistance Programs as well as the purchase of educational materials available for alcohol prevention.



## References

- Boxer, P. A., Wild, D. Psychological distress and alcohol use among fire fighters. Journal Work Environmental Health.
- Damon, M., (2002). Alcohol: True Stories hosted by Matt Damon. Words Can Work.
- Employee Assistance Program, Value Options of California. (2006) Santa Monica Firefighters 1109.
- Employee Assistance Programs, (2004, January). New Hackensack Fire District. EGV.
- Employee Assistance Program, (2006). Benefits Policies of the City of Fort Worth.
- Facts About Alcohol. (2003, October, 07). The Journal of Alcohol Research & Health Highlights From the Tenth Special Report to Congress, Health Risks and Benefits of Alcohol Consumption, 24.
- Finn, R. (2004, October). Binding Firefighter's Psychological Wounds. New York Times.
- Flynn, K. (2002). Fire Officials will Enforce Zero Tolerance. Cannabis News
- Glassman, M. (2004). Firefighters who served at Ground Zero at Higher Risks of Drinking Problems, Study Days. Coliumbia University School of Journalism.
- Goldfeder, B. (2003, September). Fire ACT-ing and Firefighter DRINKing. WithTheCommand.
- IAFC (2004). Zero Tolerance Policy. IAFC.org

Mulligan, K. (2001, October), Firefighters at Pentagon Supported by County EAP. Psycharitic News, 36. 14- 16.

Myers, L. (2004). NYC Firefighters study shows effective teamwork; scars of 9/11 linger. Cornell Chronicle, 30.

National Fire Academy (2000). Executive Leadership student manual.  
Emmitsburg, MD: author

North, C. S., Tivis, L., McMillen, J. C., Pfefferbaum, B., Spitznagel, E. L., Cox, J., Nixon, S., Bunch, K. P., Smith, E. M. (2002). Psycharitic disorders in rescue workers after the Oklahoma City bombing. American Journal of Psychiatry, 159, 857-859.

O'Conner, (2004). The San Francisco Fire Department's "dirty little secret"  
San Francisco Firefighters Local 798's, Mainline.

O'Donnell, M. (2004, March 20). Increase Seen in treatment for Firefighters. New York Times.

Pango, M., & Gauvreau, (1993). Principles of Biostatistics. Belmont California: Wadsworth, Inc.

Prevention Institute. (2006). Beyond Brochures: Preventing Alcohol-Related Violence and Injuries. Cohen, L., Swift, S.

Rauch, P., Johnson, B., (2005). Words Can Work: When Talking About Alcohol. Blake Works, Inc.

Ropp, T. (1998, February). Alternative to Alcoholism: A little-known drug, naltrexone, is hailed for success. The Arizona Republic.

Smith, J. (2003, March). Alcohol-and the Drug-Free Workplace: "Does That Include The Firehouse?" EGV.

Smith, J. (2003, April). Serving Alcohol in Fire Halls/Clubs: “Are They Illegal Bars?.” EMS House. 1-3.

Appendix A

**EXECUTIVE FIRE OFFICER  
EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP**

Survey for an Applied Research Project  
Alcoholism and Firefighters: An Intervention Strategy

1. Does your department have a policy on substance abuse that includes alcohol?  
  
Yes                      No
2. Can a firefighter be found under the influence of an illegal substance/alcohol more than once and still keep their job?  
  
Yes                      No
3. Does your department have an alcohol/substance abuse strategy/program(s) to prevent incidents in your department?  
  
Yes                      No
4. If yes to #3, please list these strategies.
5. What strategies do you think are effective?
6. Does your department have mandatory referral programs for those found to be under the influence of alcohol or other substances?  
  
Yes                      No
7. Has your department had to terminate the employment of a firefighter over the past two years due to problems with substance abuse/alcohol?  
  
Yes                      No
8. Please list what problems, if any, that substance abuse/alcohol has caused your Department over the past two years.

## Appendix B

### **EXECUTIVE FIRE OFFICER EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP**

#### Survey for an Applied Research Project Alcoholism and Firefighters: An Intervention Strategy

- 1 Does your department have a policy on substance abuse that includes alcohol?  
  
Yes (100%)                      No
- 2 Can a firefighter be found under the influence of an illegal substance/alcohol more than once and still keep their job?  
  
Yes (40%)                      No (60%)
3. Does your department have an alcohol/substance abuse strategy/program(s) to prevent incidents in your department?  
  
Yes (80%)                      No (20%)
- 4 If yes to #3, please list these strategies.  
EAP                      (100%)  
Screening              (17%)
5. What strategies do you think are effective?  
EAP                                      (33%)  
Did not know due to confidentiality (33%)
6. Does you department have mandatory referral programs for those found to be under the influence of alcohol or other substances?  
  
Yes (56%)                      No (54%)
7. Has your department had to terminate the employment of a firefighter over the past twoyears due to problems with substance abuse/alcohol?  
  
Yes (37%)                      No (63%)
8. Please list what problems, if any, that substance abuse/alcohol has caused your department over the past two years.

Loss of personnel, absenteeism, poor morale, domestic arrests, strained relationships within the department.